

Journal of Conventional Weapons Destruction

Volume 16
Issue 1 *The Journal of ERW and Mine Action*

Article 26

March 2012

Country Profile: Laos

CISR JOURNAL

Center for International Stabilization and Recovery at JMU (CISR)

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Recommended Citation

JOURNAL, CISR (2012) "Country Profile: Laos," *The Journal of ERW and Mine Action* : Vol. 16 : Iss. 1 , Article 26.

Available at: <https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/cisr-journal/vol16/iss1/26>

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Country Profile: Laos

The landlocked country of Laos borders Burma (Myanmar), Cambodia, China, Thailand and Vietnam. Although not officially involved in the Vietnam War¹, also referred to as the Second Indochina War (1954–1975), Laos was vulnerable to attacks from neighboring countries because of its location. During the Second Indochina War, northern Vietnam used the Ho Chi Minh Trail of eastern Laos to send soldiers and supplies into southern Vietnam.² Acting in secret, the United States assisted southern Vietnam and bombed northern Vietnamese soldiers along the Ho Chi Minh Trail.³ From 1964 to 1973, roughly two million tons of ordnance were dropped on the country.⁴ Since this war ended, 19 different types of cluster munitions have been found in Laos.⁵

Landmines/UXO Overview

The Second Indochina War subjected Laos to the heaviest bombing in history and is one of the main reasons the country has an extensive need for landmine and cluster-munition clearance.⁶ U.S. forces dropped more bombs on Laos' Ho Chi Min Trail than on any combination of countries during World War II.^{7,8} The extensive cluster-munition use throughout the 1960s and 1970s left Laos littered with unexploded ordnance. After the war, the International Committee of the Red Cross estimated that Laos had between nine million and 27 million UXO items remaining in the country.⁹ With 37 percent of the country's total surface area contaminated by UXO, Laos is considered to be the most UXO-affected nation in the world.¹⁰

UXO Lao, a nationally executed project of the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare and the United Nations Development Programme, reports, "More than 580,000 bombing missions were conducted over Laos. More than 270 million [bomblets] were dropped onto Laos, and of these [bomblets], up to 30 percent failed to detonate."⁵

Casualties

The total number of landmine and UXO casualties in Laos is unknown. According to a 2007 survey included in the "Circle of Impact: The Fatal Footprint of Cluster Munitions on People and Communities," 2,531 were killed and 2,179 were injured between 1965 and 1997.¹⁴ *The Landmine and Cluster Munitions Monitor* stated that 312 were killed and 739 were injured between 1999 and December 2007, noting that the statistics reported by the National Regulatory



Authority in Laos appear to be inaccurate.¹² In 2008, at least 100 casualties were reported, including 30 deaths and 69 injuries.¹³ In 2009, 41 people were killed and 93 were injured.¹³ In 2010, 117 casualties related to mines/ERW occurred, 93 of these were injuries and 24 resulted in death.¹³ UXO Lao estimates more than 50,000 people were injured or killed from UXO accidents between 1964 and 2008. Of these estimated 50,000 people, more than 20,000 were killed or injured during the post-war years, 1974–2008.⁵

Demining

Laos adopted the *Convention on Cluster Munitions* on 3 December 2008.⁴ By adopting the CCM, Laos agreed to the general obligations and scope of the CCM's application in Article 1: "Each State Party undertakes never under any circumstances to use cluster munitions; develop, produce, otherwise acquire, stockpile, retain or transfer to anyone, directly or indirectly, cluster munitions; assist, encourage or induce anyone to engage in any activity prohibited to a State Party under this Convention."¹⁴ Along with 65 additional States Parties, Laos agreed to the terms set forth in CCM. States Parties expect that when these terms begin to be implemented, the future use of cluster-munitions will be limited and related casualties will subside.

UXO Lao is Laos' largest clearance operator, and draws support from the United Nations Development Programme, UNICEF, the Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement in the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Political-Military Affairs (PM/WRA) and other stakeholders.⁵ In 2011, UXO Lao reported that over a 15-year period almost 49 percent of the UXO was cleared.⁴ UXO Lao employs more than 1,000 workers and needs US\$6.5 million yearly for operations in the nine most heavily contaminated provinces: Attapeu, Champasak, Huaphanh, Khammouane, Luang Prabang, Savannakhet, Saravane, Sekong and Xiengkhuang.⁵ In addition to UXO Lao, Mines Advisory Group and Norwegian People's Aid are also active in providing clearance services, both funded by PM/WRA. In 2010, PM/WRA contributed \$1.7 million to MAG and \$700,000 to NPA for Laos clearance.¹⁵ 📌

~ Kara Sordelett, CISR staff

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Endnotes

1. The Vietnamese call this the American War.
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